

## **GOING UNDER THE RADAR IN WESTERN SAHARA**

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### **Abstract**

At the level of formal attempts at conflict resolution, the Western Sahara conflict has been locked in a political stalemate for years. One consequence is that the people of Western Sahara are often overlooked in their own conflict – despite the fact that the very case for decolonization in Western Sahara hinges upon the right of the people of the territory to self-determination. This essay examines how, despite the ongoing formal stalemate, under the radar of formal politics in recent years there have been significant changes on the ground instigated by the people of Western Sahara. In exile in Algeria, in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, and in the Sahrawi diaspora, Sahrawis are mobilizing in new ways, targeting both Morocco and the liberation movement for Western Sahara. If these shifts have yet to shake the stalemate, this intensification of indigenous political mobilization suggests the urgency of taking the desires of the people of Western Sahara into account in any attempts to resolve the conflict.

### **Keywords**

Popular mobilization, conflict resolution, decolonization, Western Sahara

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Each passing year seems to confirm the intractability of the conflict, ongoing since 1975, over Western Sahara, the UN's last decolonization case in Africa. Sovereignty over the desert territory of 266,000 km<sup>2</sup> (roughly comparable to the size of the United Kingdom or the state of Colorado) is disputed between Morocco and Western Sahara's liberation movement, POLISARIO Front. That the conflict has fallen into the grip of apparently irreconcilable political stalemate suggests that for each party the status quo is something between tolerable, at least preferable to the likely alternatives, and for some perhaps even desirable. Yet the costs are also high. In human terms, thousands of Sahrawis (a contested term<sup>1</sup>) are either living in what a recent report described as a "state of fear" in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara (Robert F. Kennedy International Delegation 2012) or as refugees in the harsh *hamāda* desert near Tindouf, in southwest Algeria. The costs are also regional, as the unresolved conflict impedes North African integration (Zoubir 2010). There are likewise financial costs, not least for the international community. The latter is responsible not only for much aid to the refugees,<sup>2</sup> but also the annual multi-million dollar costs of the UN mission to Western Sahara (MINURSO).<sup>3</sup> For Morocco, a country with challenging human development indices,<sup>4</sup> the opportunity to exploit the phosphate and fishing resources of Western Sahara may nevertheless be outweighed by the significant resources needed for supporting the military presence in Western Sahara and subsidizing the civilian settler population.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter describes the status quo for which these costs are borne before going on to contrast it with an alternative view that, under the radar of formal politics, the conflict has undergone dynamic change in recent years. If, politically and diplomatically, the conflict over the *territory* is at an impasse, then the conflict over the *people* of Western Sahara has recently seen game-changers. The people of Western Sahara are mobilizing in new ways; they are taking novel and ground-breaking stances challenging both Morocco and POLISARIO; and they are literally on the move in new migratory patterns across the territory. If these changes pass all too easily under the radar of formal politics, this is one of many means by which the people of Western Sahara have been all too often overlooked in their own conflict. The irony of this tendency is poignant, given that, at least in international law, the Western Sahara dossier hinges upon the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination. After considering recent changes on the ground for the people of Western Sahara, the chapter concludes by relating these shifts to the regional context in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the prospects for conflict resolution.

## **Western Sahara and the status quo**

The conflict of Western Sahara took shape in the mid 1970s as the UN increased its pressure on Spain to decolonize the then Spanish Sahara. Spain agreed to conduct a plebiscite in which the territory's people would decide their political future. The UN visit to the territory in May 1975 found overwhelming local support for independence and the liberation movement, POLISARIO, formed in May 1973, which had been leading armed resistance to the Spanish colonial presence. Yet following the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion, which found that the claims to Western Sahara presented by Morocco and Mauritania did not obviate the right of the people of the territory to self-determination (International Court of Justice 1975), in November 1975 Morocco mobilized Moroccan civilians to march into and "reclaim" Spanish Sahara. Although the incursion of these civilians into the territory was

brief, the Green March was politically and symbolically potent. It increased the pressure on Spain to renege on its original decolonization plans. A few days later that month, Spain, Morocco and Mauritania signed the Madrid Tripartite Accords (MTA), which arranged for Spain to hand over the administration of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania.<sup>6</sup> Following Spain's withdrawal, Morocco and Mauritania partially annexed the territory. Thousands of civilian Sahrawis fled the territory, and from early 1976 were settled in refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria. POLISARIO fought against the annexing powers, assumed (with Algerian consent) the leadership and governance of the refugee population, and on 27 February 1976 proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Mauritania's withdrawal in August 1979, and subsequent recognition of the SADR, left POLISARIO and Morocco vying, to this day, for sovereignty over the territory.

The conflict hinges upon both a divided territory, and a division between annexed and exiled populations. In the 1980s, Morocco built a military wall as a defense against POLISARIO. Often known as the "berm", it divides the territory between a westerly portion, larger and richer in resources, under Moroccan control, and an easterly portion, without coastal access, under the control of POLISARIO. A fusion of POLISARIO and SADR operates as a government-in-exile from the refugee camps near Tindouf, and governs the exiled population. The size of this (and other) Sahrawi population(s) is disputed; in the late 2000s the refugees may have numbered between 100,000 and 160,000.<sup>7</sup> Other Sahrawi communities in southern Morocco, northern Mauritania, as well as migrant communities in Europe, live in varying degrees of contact with the annexed and/or exiled populations.

Some commentators apprehend the conflict over Western Sahara as a dispute between Morocco and Algeria, with POLISARIO as the latter's stooge. Nevertheless, Algeria has never made a claim on Western Sahara. It has been argued that the tensions and rivalry between Morocco and Algeria would not end if the Western Sahara conflict were resolved (Willis 2012; Zoubir 2001; Zunes and Mundy 2010). Conversely, some analysts have suggested that if Morocco and Algeria were to resolve their own differences, this would not bring an end to the question of Western Sahara, where the nationalism of the people of Western Sahara, which cannot be reduced to a question of Moroccan-Algerian relations, is at stake (Zunes and Mundy 2010). Seeing the conflict in terms of Morocco and Algeria exacerbates the tendency to overlook the people of Western Sahara in their own conflict.

Analysts of Western Sahara agree that the conflict is at a stalemate (Dunbar 2000; International Crisis Group 2007; Jensen 2005; Theofilopoulou 2006; Zoubir 2007; Zunes and Mundy 2010). The UN-brokered ceasefire of 1991, which brought 16 years of military confrontation to a halt, has arguably transferred the conflict from military to non-military fronts (Zunes and Mundy 2010). These new fronts include the corridors of the UN, non-violent protests in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, and a discursive and political battle between Morocco and POLISARIO to be recognized as a legitimate actual and potential government for the people of Western Sahara (cf Clarke 2006; Messari 2001). Just as the military battle could not be won outright by either party (Zunes and Mundy 2010), nor, it would seem, can any of these new arenas of conflict.

One of the major erstwhile proposed solutions to the conflict, a referendum on self-determination, has likewise fallen into a dead-end. The UN's plans for a self-determination referendum are perhaps now virtually reduced to a rhetorical presence in the name of the UN mission for a "referendum" in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The revised plans of the UN

Secretary General's former Special Envoy to Western Sahara, James A. Baker, for a referendum, even one that gave a vote to Moroccan citizens continuously resident in the territory since 1999, ended in deadlock. Morocco refuses a referendum that would include independence as an option, and POLISARIO insists on the inclusion of independence as an option.<sup>8</sup>

There is also a deadlock pitting rhetoric against Realpolitik. The official *raison d'être* for the conflict has always hinged upon the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination. This right arises from the UN's designation of the territory as non self-governing, and was confirmed in the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion of 1975. UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions continue to observe the language of the fulfillment of the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. But resolutions also repeat the need for a mutually acceptable political solution. This entrenches the stalemate, because the political agendas of parties to, or influential in, the conflict are either not always, or only potentially, compatible with self-determination.

On the side of POLISARIO and its allies, POLISARIO claims to prioritize self-determination. If it also combines that priority with others, such as independence and POLISARIO's own survival as a liberation movement, then these priorities are at least potentially compatible with self-determination. Algeria's discourse about the conflict also emphasizes its support for self-determination. Its continued support may in fact have much to do with its own fears of, and wishes to contain, Morocco's potential expansion (Willis 2012: 274); but, for the moment, these interests are, again, compatible with support for self-determination. But notably, Algeria's and POLISARIO's broader political agendas are only compatible with self-determination interpreted as a choice made by, rather than for, the people of Western Sahara.

On the side of Morocco and its allies, in contrast, the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara is only compatible with broader political agendas if self-determination is curtailed to preclude any option that leaves Western Sahara not internationally recognized as part of the Kingdom of Morocco—in other words a choice already made for the people of Western Sahara. Thus, Morocco has supported self-determination to the extent that it believed its fulfillment would affirm the territory's status as part of Morocco. In the 1950s Morocco was supportive of the decolonization of the former Spanish Sahara through a referendum on self-determination (Willis 2012: 270-1). Later, Morocco claimed that an act of self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, confirming Moroccan sovereignty, had already occurred through the vote of a minority of the members of Spain's *djemaa*, or Council of *Shuyukh* [tribal leaders], in 1976. This vote was not recognized by the UN or Spain as fulfilling self-determination (Hodges 1983: 235). It has been argued that driving Morocco's tenacity in its position on Western Sahara, however, is a concern not for self-determination, but rather the regime's conviction that, through the cause of the "Moroccan Sahara", it can unite its own fractious political scene and keep threats to the monarchy in abeyance (Willis 2012: 272). Similarly, Morocco's closest Western allies on Western Sahara, France and the US, are arguably not motivated in that support by a concern for self-determination, or even a view of the validity of Morocco's claims to the territory. Instead, it has been claimed, their support is based on the view that if the monarchy loses the Sahara, it might lead to the collapse of one of the West's closest allies in the Maghreb (Zunes and Mundy 2010).<sup>9</sup>

Not only is the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara not a political priority for Morocco and its allies, then, but in fact their actual priorities seem in direct conflict with self-determination understood as a choice made by the people of Western Sahara. That UNSC resolutions insist on both self-determination and a mutually acceptable political solution, when there is incompatibility between the political agendas of the parties to or influential in the conflict and their approaches to self-determination, predisposes the conflict to remain trapped in the status quo.

The incompatibility at the heart of UNSC resolutions projects onto the face-to-face meetings and negotiations between Morocco and POLISARIO. These resumed in 2007, also the year in which Morocco presented an autonomy proposal for Western Sahara. But with each side continuing to attend to its own political priorities, incompatible with those of the other, each round of meetings ends with no breakthrough.

The formal politics of the Western Sahara conflict are at a standstill. This status quo is not only a reproduced effect, but is also active in quashing potential new developments in formal politics. For instance, there have been calls from human rights NGOs (Human Rights Watch 2008, 2012) and from the UN commission on torture (United Nations Committee against Torture 2011) for investigations into alleged human rights abuses by Morocco against pro-independence Sahrawi political activists in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. Nevertheless, when the MINURSO mandate is renewed by the UNSC, requests for the peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara to include human rights monitoring (as most other UN peacekeeping missions include) are vetoed by Morocco's allies at the Security Council or dropped.<sup>10</sup> When a pre-released version of the 2012 UN Secretary General's report on Western Sahara was critical of Morocco for compromising the neutrality of the UN, and explicit in suggesting MINURSO's role to implement self-determination, it was later edited to produce a final report that was less critical of Morocco, and referred to MINURSO's role to implement UNSC resolutions (What's in Blue 2012). Thus, the status quo blocks potential new developments in formal politics.

Despite the ongoing lack of, and obstacles to, any breakthrough in formal politics, in recent years, affairs on the ground have been far from static. In fact, the more the stasis takes hold of formal politics, the more shifts on the ground seem to intensify.

## **New developments under the radar**

### ***Popular mobilization***

A major development on the ground in recent years has been the proliferation and intensification of popular political mobilization amongst Sahrawis, directed at both Morocco and POLISARIO. Neither of these trends is without precedent, but both forms have manifested themselves in new ways since 2005.

If Sahrawi popular political mobilization against Morocco was for a long time centered in POLISARIO's leadership in exile, then from 1999, when Sahrawis in the annexed territory began non-violent demonstrations of resistance against Morocco (see Shelley 2004), the role and profile of the annexed population in anti-Moroccan mobilization has grown. In 2005, annexed Sahrawis became the new, or at least rival, center of gravity in the Sahrawi pro-

independence movement. Protests by annexed Sahrawis against Morocco intensified, becoming what both annexed and exiled Sahrawis came to call their “Intifada” (Mundy 2006). In 2010, annexed Sahrawis’ protests reached an unprecedented level.

From 9 October to 8 November 2010, Sahrawis set up tents to form protest camps in the desert near El ‘Ayoun, at a place called Gdeim Izik. The Moroccan authorities highly restricted access to the protest camps for outsiders. They suspended the Moroccan office of *Al Jazeera* news channel on 29 October 2010 (*The Guardian* 2010). With the exception of one international security officer being allowed in on 4 November, Morocco otherwise prevented UN monitors from accessing the site (United Nations Security Council 2011). European and Moroccan press coverage has stressed economic aspects of protestors’ demands, such as demands for jobs and homes (e.g. BBC 2010; Radio France Internationale 2010; Bennani 2011). Video footage from the protest camp, though, stresses political dimensions and opposition to Moroccan control over the territory (Sahara Thawra 2010).

The protest camp grew quickly in size. The number of protestors may have reached as many as 20,000 by 8 November (Verdier 2010).<sup>11</sup> Tensions between protestors and the Moroccan authorities grew quickly too, especially after Moroccan security forces shot and killed a 14 year old Sahrawi boy who was trying to join the encampment on 24 October (Radio France Internationale 2010). On the morning of 8 November, “Moroccan auxiliary forces and police officers forcefully dispersed the protesters and destroyed the camp using tear gas, water cannons, batons and loudspeakers mounted on vehicles and helicopters. There is no evidence that live ammunition or other lethal means were used” (United Nations Security Council 2011). In the clash, both sides claimed fatal casualties, eleven on the side of the Moroccans, and four on the side of the Sahrawis. After the dismantling of Gdeim Izik, further violence ensued in the city of El ‘Ayoun, where it was reported that Sahrawis attacked public and private property, and Moroccan settlers attacked Sahrawi private property (United Nations Security Council 2011). Many Sahrawis were arrested in connection with Gdeim Izik. In 2013, 24 were condemned by a military court to sentences ranging from life to two years (*Al Jazeera* 2013).<sup>12</sup>

Gdeim Izik, and especially its dénouement, attracted international attention and criticism of Morocco’s handling of the protests. But the international attention brought to it was proportionate to general international levels of interest in Western Sahara—that is to say, it was scant and short-lived. This continued to be the case, even when, a few weeks after Gdeim Izik, political and economic protest took off in Tunisia, spreading to Egypt and then across the Arab world. Some Sahrawis (cf. Lewis 2011), and some observers, such as Noam Chomsky (Democracy Now! 2011), claim annexed Sahrawis’ protests as the first in the Arab Spring. The Arab world (Morocco excepted) generally paying little attention to Western Sahara, it seems unreasonable to claim that Tunisians, Egyptians or others took inspiration from Western Sahara, as so many in the Arab world took inspiration from Tunisia and Egypt. Yet the absence of a causal relationship between Gdeim Izik and other uprisings does not preclude there being other connections between the Sahrawis’ largest protest to date—perhaps, as a proportion of the total population, one of the largest protests in the Arab world since 2010<sup>13</sup>—and protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt and beyond (see Wilson 2013).

If Gdeim Izik made little international impact, there can be little doubt that it was a game-changer in relations between annexed Sahrawis and Moroccans, both settlers in Western Sahara and the authorities. The violence between Sahrawis and Moroccans that followed the

dismantling of the protest camps laid to rest the “myth” of peaceful cohabitation between the two groups in the troubled region (Bennani 2011). Indeed, since then there has been further violence; the initial death of one Sahrawi in violence after a Dakhla football match in September 2011 led to further clashes between Moroccan settlers and Sahrawis (United Nations Security Council 2012). When visiting Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara in 2012, I asked some Sahrawi women how they dressed and spoke when they visited cities in the north of Morocco. They told me that before Gdeim Izik, they had worn a *melhfa* (style of dress favored by Sahrawi and other hassanophone women) and not disguised their Hassaniya dialect. In the wake of Gdeim Izik, though, they preferred to change their dress and speech when going north to avoid attracting negative reactions if they were recognized as Sahrawis.

If ordinary Moroccans were shocked about the violence in which the protests had ended (violence for which they held Sahrawis responsible), then the authorities seem also to have been disturbed by the scale of the protest. In the wake of Gdeim Izik, for the first time ever, a Sahrawi, rather than a Moroccan, was appointed to the position of governor of El ‘Ayoune (Bennani 2011). The new constitution of 2011, put forward by the monarchy in response to the 20<sup>th</sup> February movement, Morocco’s Arab Spring protest group, included recognition for the first time for what is named in the constitution as the “Hassani” language. Such recognition remains firmly within Morocco’s framework of cultural and linguistic diversity within the perceived national territory, but was perhaps an attempt to concede something in the face of the largest Sahrawi protest to date.<sup>14</sup>

It is not only in annexed Western Sahara that Sahrawis have recently intensified their popular political mobilization. Mobilization demanding political change is reported across several sites, targeting not Morocco but POLISARIO. Like the mobilization of annexed Sahrawis against Morocco, recent mobilization targeting POLISARIO is not without precedent. In 1988 there were protests in the refugee camps calling for internal political reforms (Zunes 1999). In 2004 a movement claiming to be both within POLISARIO and yet critical of it went public, later adopting the name *khatt ashshahīd* (the line of the martyr). It called for internal reforms within POLISARIO, criticized its alleged corruption, nepotism and tribalism, and advocated a return to war (Campbell 2010). The change in recent years is that it now seems routinized for popular political mobilization in the refugee camps, and, reportedly, amongst Sahrawis elsewhere, such as in Spain and even annexed Western Sahara, to direct demands for change and reform against POLISARIO (cf Gómez Martín and Omet 2009). Curiously, these demands simultaneously reaffirm support for POLISARIO—a political dynamic which leads Gómez Martín and Omet (2009) to dub these movements “non-dissident dissidences”.<sup>15</sup> This is an interesting notion with which to critique the Euro-American expectation that formal political opposition should take the form of rival political parties.

Demonstrations in the refugee camps demanding political reforms of POLISARIO have been reported on a “small scale” on 5 March 2011, in late 2011 and March 2012 (United Nations Security Council 2011, 2012). In fieldwork in the refugee camps in September 2011 and February 2012, interlocutors discussed not only the aforementioned demonstrations of March and late 2011, but also further “demonstrations” in the refugee camps in the wake of Gdeim Izik demanding a return to war, as well as incidents, in summer 2011 and early 2012, of public protest against particular policies. In February 2012, I observed two Sahrawi women refugees, who discovered that they were not registered to vote in the SADR Parliamentary elections, confront a male officer of POLISARIO saying “We won’t accept

this. We'll demonstrate." On that occasion, the officer established a dialog with the women, who eventually accepted that their absence from the refugee camps in the period prior to the elections had prevented their registration. The women departed on good terms with the officer.<sup>16</sup> Dialog and negotiations were also the means with which, in the third party reports I collected, actual rather than threatened demonstrations were met. This reported series of demonstrations in the refugee camps, and the readiness with which a vocabulary of demonstrations came to the lips of those confronting an officer of POLISARIO, suggest not so much that the refugees are becoming increasingly "ungovernable", but rather that governance in the refugee camps is not threatened by the expression of dissent in the public domain, and that it is now an established feature of political life in exile that frustrations can be made public through collective action. The readiness of a language and practice of demonstrations of dissent is also surely a sign of the increasingly high levels of frustration amongst the exiled population—frustration not only with POLISARIO, but also, ultimately, with the international community and its status quo.

### ***Moving to take a stand***

In parallel to new popular mobilizations, several individuals from Western Sahara have used movement in and out of the conflict's key zones to establish novel political platforms. In a highly ironic twist, given that a demonstration of up to perhaps 20,000 Sahrawis was overlooked by most of the world, the actions of one woman brought Western Sahara briefly to the attention of the Western media in 2009. Human rights activist Aminetou Haidar, from annexed Western Sahara, was denied entry to El 'Ayoun by Moroccan authorities on 13 November 2009 when she refused to register her nationality as "Moroccan" on her entry card. Expelled to Lanzarote airport (Canary Islands), she staged a hunger strike there. Under pressure from its allies, France and the United States, the Moroccan authorities relented and allowed her to return on 17 December (Rainsford 2009).

Seven other Sahrawis from annexed Western Sahara and southern Morocco, dubbed the "Casablanca seven", used movement to and from the refugee camps to foreground political protest. They made an openly-declared visit to the Tindouf refugee camps before returning to Casablanca airport. Ordinarily, Morocco only tolerates persons it claims as its own citizens to visit the refugee camps openly through the UN organized visits to reunite family members separated by the conflict. (Families operate various clandestine means to find other ways of meeting up with relatives outside these UN visits, discussed below.) The seven were arrested on their return to Casablanca airport on 8 October 2009, accused of threatening the security of the Moroccan state, and their case was sent to a military court. One was freed in January 2010, three in May 2010 and three in April 2011 (Amnesty International 2011).

A third case of interest is that of POLISARIO police officer Mostapha Selma Sidi Mouloud. There is a long history of exiles leaving the refugee camps for annexed Western Sahara as a one-way trip, interpreted by POLISARIO as defection, and by Morocco as acquiescence to Moroccan claims over Western Sahara.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to such one-way trips, more recently Sahrawi refugees have come to make unofficial short-term visits to annexed Western Sahara before returning to the refugee camps, round trips which are tolerated by POLISARIO (see below). During one such visit, however, Sidi Mouloud made a public endorsement of Morocco's plan for autonomy for Western Sahara before setting off to return



to the refugee camps. The politics of his movements between the conflict's divided areas thus invert those of the "Casablanca seven". Before reaching the refugee camps, Sidi Mouloud was arrested by POLISARIO on 21 September 2010 (Human Rights Watch 2010), and then released on 2 December 2010 (*Alarabiya* 2010).

Each of these three cases of movement on an individual level resulted in new political platforms: Haidar's because of the international reaction she garnered, and the latter two cases because of individuals' unprecedented, and to date still unique, use of movement to provoke a reaction from a party to the conflict. In an international climate of stalemate where nothing seems to change, individuals on the ground are forging their own new political terrains.

### ***Moving to beat the system***

The final case that I consider of change under the radar of formal politics is popular, and thus somewhat akin to the popular mobilizations examined above. It also concerns movement between the conflict's zones, and is therefore analogous to the case of individuals taking a stand through movement. But unlike either of the previous cases, this new development seeks to avoid rather than provoke a reaction from one of the parties to the conflict. After years during which the movement of annexed and exiled Sahrawis between the spaces of annexation and exile was impeded by war, closed borders, and politics, the situation eased somewhat after the ceasefire and the opening of the land border between Morocco and Mauritania. During fieldwork in the refugee camps in 2007-2009, I not infrequently met annexed Sahrawis who were informally visiting the refugee camps with the full knowledge of the refugees and POLISARIO, but without that of Morocco. Exiled Sahrawis also made informal visits to the annexed areas, which they distinguished from "defections" by disguising their identities in various ways from Moroccan authorities (although they did not disguise these visits from POLISARIO). In this context of increased and more relaxed access, in 2010, by several accounts, there was a boom in "defections" from the refugee camps (Bennani 2010; Filali-Ansary 2010).<sup>18</sup> "Defectors" at the time received a house and monthly maintenance allowance from the Moroccan authorities, to the tune in the late 2000s of 1250 dirhams (115 euros) (Bennani 2010; Soudan 2010). Some Moroccan accounts questioned the motives of the 2010 rush of defectors, many of whom were single young men (Bennani 2010; Soudan 2010). Exiled Sahrawis had their own ideas as to the reason for the "boom". They explained that "defectors" claimed benefits from the Moroccan state, sold them on, and then returned, suitably enriched, to the refugee camps. I met people who had successfully completed this circuit, and my interlocutors could name more. After Gdeim Izik, Morocco's policy changed, and houses were only given to family groups of defectors. The "boom" desisted. Though apparently short-lived, the "defection boom" saw some Sahrawis on the ground improvise a means of manipulating the presumed political phenomenon of defections for quite other purposes.<sup>19</sup>

### **Western Sahara beyond the Arab Spring**

The situation on the ground in Western Sahara in the last few years has been far from “more of the same”. The people of Western Sahara have been mobilizing and migrating in new ways that challenge both Morocco and POLISARIO. But if Western Sahara’s formal politics seem to be “business as usual”, year after year, even at a time when the Maghreb has seen the most radical political change in decades, then does this merely suggest that Western Sahara is the misfit in the Maghreb? In the light of the internal and external threats brought by the Arab Spring, Maghreb states have reissued calls for unity and cooperation (Zoubir 2012). Even when this has concerned Morocco and Algeria directly, though, it has left the issue of Western Sahara (and closed land borders between Algeria and Morocco) unmentioned (Zoubir 2012: 97). Given the entrenchment of the status quo, it is hard to imagine how Western Sahara could come to fulfill its alleged potential as a driver for deeper integration in the Maghreb (cf Zoubir 2012).

I suggest that, far from being a superfluous and awkward piece in the Maghreb jigsaw, Western Sahara sits on the very fault line that has so recently reconfigured the Maghreb. The Arab Spring took so many people and governments by surprise because the uprisings appeared to be indigenous movements, and it had long been assumed that there could be no change there without external support (Willis 2012: 332-333). If such assumptions have been shaken elsewhere in the Maghreb, Western Sahara is surely one of their last strongholds. A conviction that political change cannot be achieved without external support enables and dictates the ease with which the people of Western Sahara are routinely overlooked in their own conflict. Yet indigenous political mobilization in Western Sahara cannot be reduced historically to mere dependence on external support. Algerian support for POLISARIO came after POLISARIO’s foundation, and after Algeria’s initial support for partition between Morocco and Mauritania and cold shoulder to POLISARIO (Willis 2012: 273-4, 277). Algeria’s subsequent support for POLISARIO, especially in providing a safe haven during the war, was crucial (Willis 2012: 277); but in today’s context of transnational civil society solidarity for self-determination in Western Sahara, and remittances from Sahrawis’ international migration, it is not clear that the future of nationalism in Western Sahara relies on the support of external state actors. Recent developments on the ground indicate that indigenous political mobilization is strengthening and solidifying, not dissolving. This raises questions about the potential effects of indigenous mobilization on the conflict and its stalled resolution.

In formal circles, the notion that indigenous mobilization could shake the stalemate is receiving increasing attention. The UN Special Envoy to Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, calling in November 2012 for the stagnant formal negotiations to be suspended, advocated not only “quiet shuttle diplomacy” between the parties, but also an increase in contact between the divided Sahrawi populations, citing the potential of such contact “to change perceptions even in the absence of movement in the negotiating process” (Ross 2012). On the other hand, fears that Sahrawis’ frustrations may transform into radicalization are also cited as a reason to shake the status quo (e.g. Ross 2012). The evidence for existing radicalization amongst Sahrawis is elusive, though. The kidnapping in October 2011 of three European humanitarian workers in the refugee camps—the first such incident to take place in the refugee camps—was claimed by the extremist Mali-based Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa. If policy-makers focus on questions of security that neglect the concerns raised in actual, rather than potential, indigenous mobilizations, this may ultimately reproduce in a new form the familiar overlooking of the people of Western Sahara in their own conflict. Finally, indigenous mobilization has raised the international profile of the

Western Sahara conflict, and the opportunity to address an international audience only strengthens indigenous mobilization. This makes it all the less likely for a solution to achieve popular acquiescence unless that solution addresses the concerns around which people are mobilizing. It seems that intensified indigenous mobilization gives grounds for both optimism that the stalemate could be shaken, and caution that an increasingly mobilized indigenous population will resist all the more any political solution in which the people of Western Sahara have been overlooked.

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<sup>1</sup> The people of Western Sahara use “Sahrawi” to refer to their national identity, but the term also has a wider, non-specialist meaning in Arabic of “pertaining to the desert”. For a discussion, see Zunes and Mundy 2010: 92-95.

<sup>2</sup> The number of refugees for which aid is provided has fluctuated, exacerbated by controversy over the size of the population resident in the refugee camps (see note 7 below). Zunes and Mundy (2010: 127-128) write that “[f]ollowing reports and studies indicating widespread malnutrition, aid was increased to 155,000 persons in 2000 and again to 158,000 in 2004. In 2005, however, the UNHCR and World Food Program reduced the number to 90,000 persons”. This reduction in aid was presented in terms of the aid agencies seeking to help the most vulnerable refugees. A recent report highlights high rates of malnutrition, as well as obesity, amongst the Sahrawi refugee population (Grijalva-Eternod et al 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara, MINURSO, has been running since 1991; the approved budget for MINURSO for July 2012 to June 2013 was \$60,796,600 (United Nations General Assembly 2012).

<sup>4</sup> In the 2011 UNDP Human Development Ranking, Morocco ranks 130 of 187 countries (UNDP 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Morocco’s revenues from the exploitation of resources in Western Sahara, and the costs of supporting a Moroccan military and civilian presence there, are not transparently documented in the public domain. For an argument that the financial costs of annexation outweigh the financial gains of resource exploitation, see Shelley 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Of two UN General Assembly resolutions passed on 10 December 1976 in the wake of the MTA, resolution 3458 A called for a popular referendum on self-determination, without acknowledging the MTA, and resolution 3458 B took note of the MTA whilst still calling, beyond the content of the MTA, for a popular consultation on self-determination (Ruíz 2008: 12).

<sup>7</sup> In 2000, the numbers of Sahrawi adult voters approved by the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) were 41,150 for Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and 33,998 for the refugee camps (Zunes and Mundy 2010: 214). For a discussion of population figures for the refugee camps, see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasimiyeh and Crivello (2010: 41).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Baker’s two referendum plans, see Zunes and Mundy 2010.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of third parties’ interests in the Western Sahara conflict, see Darbouche and Zoubir 2008.

<sup>10</sup> In April 2012 France opposed the proposed inclusion of human rights monitoring in the MINURSO mandate (What’s in Blue 2012). In April 2013 the United States initially proposed to include human rights monitoring in MINURSO, following which Morocco cancelled joint military exercises with its ally (USA Today 2013). The United States then dropped the proposed inclusion of human rights monitoring (What’s in Blue 2013).

<sup>11</sup> The UN estimates 6,610 tents at Gdeim Izik, suggesting “over 15,000” demonstrators (United Nations Security Council 2011: 1).

<sup>12</sup> On the Gdeim Izik protest, see Murphy and Omar 2013 and Wilson 2013.

<sup>13</sup> If protestors did indeed reach some 20,000 people, then, given an adult annexed Sahrawi adult population of 41,150 in 2000, this was, in local context, a markedly high rate of participation in a protest.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of how the Moroccan constitution of 2011 maintained authoritarian powers in the hands of the monarchy, missing the opportunity to introduce real changes that could favor a resolution for the conflict on Western Sahara, see Theofilopoulou 2012. For a discussion of the place assigned to Sahrawis in official Moroccan nationalism, see Deubel 2012.

<sup>15</sup> All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of elections in the refugee camps, see Wilson 2010.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of exiles who leave the refugee camps to live in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, see Hernández 2001; Wilson 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Refugee interlocutors also recalled 2010 as a time of a boom in “defections”.

<sup>19</sup> On migration movements to and from the refugee camps, including the “defection boom”, see Wilson 2014.